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"Where a Panchayat is really popular and increases its popularity by constructive work, it will find its judgement and authority respected by reason of its moral prestige. And that surely is the greatest sanction anyone can possess and of which one cannot be deprived."

—MAHATMA GANDHI

KATLI PANCHAYAT MARCHES ON

The tenth of October is a red letter day for Katli village in Rajasthan. Exactly a year ago the village Panchayat was elected by the Gaon Sabha or the seven hundred and odd adults of the village, both men and women.

The Gaon Sabha of Katli met three times last year. Hardly any people attended the first meeting and there were no questions. The villagers did not quite realize that they had certain responsibilities to the community; far less were they conscious of their own rights. But the atmosphere has gradually begun to change. The villagers are now taking more and more interest. The Panchayat is also taking the people into confidence. In fact the people's united support is making the Panchayat stronger day by day. And they, in turn, are able to keep a check on the activities of the Panchayat, individually as well as collectively through the Gaon Sabha.

Today is the anniversary day of the election, the Gaon Sabha is again meeting to take stock of the activities of the past year.

"We got our seeds late with the result that we did not get a good crop," said a voice.

This caused a commotion in the august assembly. There were hurried consultations among the members of the Panchayat. "Why did we get the seeds late ?" someone asked. Anup Singh, the Sarpanch, rose to speak amid appeals for silence. He explained the entire position. The Panchayat had tried its best to get the seeds from the agricultural officer in time. The agricultural officer was, in turn, depending on the District Headquarters for the supply of seeds. There were various bottlenecks with the result that when the seeds reached the village, the sowing season was already over.

The Sarpanch told the assembly that the Panchayat had taken an important decision. It was this. In the future they would not depend on outside agencies for the supply of seeds.

"We will produce our own seeds ourselves," the Sarpanch declared. All the farmers agreed enthusiastically.

Anup Singh, the Sarpanch, then started with the day's business.

The first item in the agenda was irrigation. This is not surprising in a State like Rajasthan where every drop of water is precious to the farmer. Even now the fate of many farmers depends entirely on the rains. But now the Panchayat of Katli has a definite plan which will help to end the farmers' helpless struggle against the vagaries of nature.

The proposal is a well thought out one. It was carefully checked by the technical expert of the Community Development Block before it was put to the Gaon Sabha. One of the most important tasks was to enlist the active support of all the villagers who will ultimately have to implement the proposal with their own hands.

The Sarpanch went on to explain the scheme to the villagers.

"The stream Mahi is nearby. But it flows for only two months in the year when it rains. For the rest of the year, it is all dry. Suppose an earthen bund were built across the stream so that the excess rain water could be stored and diverted for irrigation. The Community Development Block engineer says that it could be done. The Block will give us not only technical guidance, but also some money. What do you all say ? Shall we take up the work right now ?"

One of the villagers said, "Why should I help ? I have no land at all, and the excess water would be of no earthly use to me."

For a time there was confusion in the meeting. But order was eventually restored. The Sarpanch tried to answer

the point. He explained how each person in the village, landowning or landless, would benefit from such a project. The benefit would not necessarily be direct. For instance, if the new scheme of irrigation were successful, the land would yield two crops instead of one. This would straightway mean more employment opportunities for the landless labourer in the sowing and harvesting seasons. When the village is prosperous with surplus agricultural produce, the Panchayat will have more money at its disposal to spend on various amenities which, again, would be meant for the villagers.

Another person then said, "Can't the Community Development Block do it on their own?"

Many people supported this stand, because they felt that after all it was the Government's job.

At this, there was a mild rebuke from the Sarpanch. "What is the use of your Panchayat? Is it not part of the Government? You must realize that when we have certain rights, we also have some corresponding responsibilities. Now, this business of the earthen bund is certainly one of our own responsibilities. There is no reason why we should not discharge this responsibility, especially since we even have the Block's help at our beck and call.

There was silence and then a murmur of assent. Even the waverers fell in with the original proposal of the Sarpanch. The members of the Panchayat were, of course, the happiest.

The next item on the agenda was to review the small savings drive that had been going on in the village for the past year. The Panchayat, with the help of the Yuvak Mandal and the Mahila Mandal, was trying to sell small savings certificates of lower denominations. There was some response from the villagers, who were now finding that they had some extra money to put by for a rainy day. The collections made in the village totalled Rs. 1,200. The Gram Sevak felt that the effort could be further stepped up. The Sarpanch now invited the gathering to suggest ways and means of doing this.

"If we could be approached immediately after the harvest season, there is a better chance of our having something to spare," said someone.

"Why shouldn't we cut down some of the unnecessary expense we incur during marriages or other ceremonies ?" said another person.

After some discussion, with points for and against, both these suggestions were approved. The village teacher was particularly helpful in convincing the villagers that they should save the money they spent on ceremonial occasions. He pointed out that this saving would be of immense help in the education of their children. "Isn't the education of your child more important than having fireworks at a festival ?" he asked.

The next item was the arrears due to the absentee landlord. Village development schemes often suffer because money is not readily available. The landlord does not come to the village; nor does he take interest in his land. The result is that the agricultural production of the village cannot effectively be stepped up. Moreover, the land of the absentee landlord yields less revenue. The Panchayat, which has only meagre resources at its command, cannot afford to lose its share from the land revenue which the State Government has allocated to it. Though it has been given the power to raise taxes on trades and professions, there has not been any sizeable income on that account, since the village is composed mostly of farmers, with only a few traders and professional men. It is the same in the case of buildings. The Panchayat has the authority to levy tax on buildings, but there are not many which could be taxed.

No tax has been imposed on vehicles yet. If it were, it might prove to be a good source. There are eleven bullock carts in the village which the owners not only use to carry their own grain to the 'mandi', but also rent out to others. There should not be much objection to tax on carts.

It was decided at the meeting that a delegation of villagers should be sent to the landlord who lived in the town

nearby. The delegation was to ask him to return to the village, settle down, and, like a true son of the soil, join his fellow villagers in implementing development schemes.

It was felt that this landlord with his education and background could be of great use to the village. It was also decided to request his three sons, who studied in colleges in the city, to live in the village, at least during their vacations, so that they could be of service to the village. For instance, they could help the village school teacher to conduct his classes.

This led to a discussion on the village school and how it could be improved. The school teacher, Bhikaram, was invited by the Sarpanch to speak on the subject. He had nothing complicated to say. The plight of his school was more or less the same as of schools in other Indian villages. To begin with, its thatched roof required immediate repair.

"Can we not have a small brick building rather than repair the hut every year after the rains?"

"That is a crazy idea," murmured someone. "How on earth can we afford it?"

But the teacher was not a dreamer. He gave facts and figures to show that in the last five years enough money and manpower had been spent to render the idea of constructing a modest school building perfectly feasible. "Even if we don't have money to spare, we have plenty of human material," the teacher said.

This challenge was regarded in silence. Yes, why couldn't they do it? In the past one year the village had done many good things. Why not a school building for the children—their own children?

Sardara, the strong man of the village, who worked on other people's lands on daily wages, was the first to speak. With a voice choked with emotion—this was the first time he had spoken in an assembly like this—he announced that he would work without payment for the school if the construction was taken up in the slack season. Two of his

associates, who were also daily wage labourers, said they would do the same. The village carpenter followed their lead. He said he would make all the doors and windows for the school, free of cost. The Sarpanch promised to supply the necessary timber. He then asked Bhanwar Singh, the youth leader, whether the Yuvak Mandal of the village could mobilize manpower for the task. Bhanwar Singh assured him that it would be done.

Some people even offered cash on the spot. Plans for making bricks were discussed. The Gram Sevak was entrusted with the job of co-ordinating all activities under the guidance of the teacher. It was further resolved to get the plans for the building made by the Community Development Block overseer through the Panchayat Samiti. The Sarpanch, who is an *ex-officio* member of the Samiti, promised to see the matter through.

"What are you going to do about the girls ?" demanded a shrill voice. Everyone turned to look at the speaker. It was Parbati, leader of the Mahila Mandal attached to the Panchayat. The Mahila Mandal, Parbati said, had raised this question with the Sarpanch earlier. He had thereupon asked the Panchayat's functional committee on women and children's welfare to examine the proposal. This had been done. The committee was all for doing something for the girls. But there were some problems, which called for a detailed discussion on the whole question of girls' education. Here, at last, was the opportunity.

"Women are proverbial trouble-shooters," commented Rup Chand, the old man of the village. He was longing for the meeting to end so that he could go home and relax on his charpai with his hukkah. "Take this woman, now. I am sure she is going to make trouble."

But Parbati was not going to do any such thing. Her case was simple and straightforward. She had heard from her aunt who lived in a village nearby that her granddaughter had begun to attend the village school. Why couldn't the fourteen girls of Katli village do the same ? If

they didn't, wouldn't they turn into problem children with nothing much to do?

"So they have to become high court judges?" asked the old man in disgust.

"That is not the point," the teacher said patiently. He had for some time past been worrying about the problem of girls' education.

Anup Singh, the man who always had a solution for everything, came out with one.

"Let the girls go to the same school as the boys when the building is complete and study together with the boys," he said.

"What? This is preposterous," the old man exclaimed angrily. But the angry voice was drowned in the enthusiastic cheers with which the Gaon Sabha accepted the proposal.

"These new fangled ideas will lead us all to ruin," the old man grumbled as he left. But the meeting went on.

Yes, the village had progressed steadily through the combined efforts of the villagers. Anup Singh recalled those days, not far back, when the villagers lacked even the most rudimentary civic sense. The dirty village pond, the source of all disease, was nobody's business. When the rain washed away the village lanes, nobody bothered to repair them. Anup Singh had not forgotten the old man's reply when he once proposed that the road repair work should be taken up. "Oh, so that you youngsters may be able to walk with your shoes on!" had been the caustic comment.

The use of latrines was unheard of in the village. Anup Singh still remembers the embarrassment of the village landlord when his son-in-law, a graduate from the city, left the village all of a sudden when he could not find a latrine in the house. The landlord also left the village soon after, never to return. No one knows why could he not have lived better himself and introduced more hygienic ways of living

to the people of his village. If even village leaders shirk such responsibility, who is going to look after the poor people ?

Most of the people in the village are agriculturists. But there are also families of carpenters, blacksmiths, and cobblers. Some of the people, not having enough land to depend on throughout the year, are now engaged in cottage industries like *ban* making and *gur* making. In village development work, everyone must be mindful of the contribution expected of them towards the general welfare of the village. Only then can a village prosper. Now there is all-round prosperity in the village, and because of it even the landless labourer is getting more chances of employment. Now he does not hesitate to offer *shramdan* or voluntary labour for community activities from which his sons and grandsons will benefit in the long run.

Even the outsiders—there are always one or two who purchase grain in the village market or collect labour from the village in the harvesting season—have their part to play in the welfare of the village. Formerly they used to contact people individually; now they do so through the Panchayat. The Panchayat sees to it that the outsiders get as much help from the villagers as possible. This has made them a part of the life of the village. The Panchayat has made their work easier. They, in return, are only too eager to help the Panchayat when they can. In the same way, the Bharat Sevak Samaj worker, although he comes from a different village, is part and parcel of Katli.

In Katli, the villagers get vaccinated in time. The Samiti doctor, and not the village quack, is the most welcome visitor. When infectious diseases break out—as did smallpox this year—it is no longer a matter of secrecy among villagers. It is announced immediately and the patient is segregated. This is good for all. Drinking water wells are not polluted any more. Village grazing grounds, forests, and road-side trees are properly cared for. When land holdings were consolidated, the village was left with some excess land. This has now been used to build roads. The young

people look well and happy since the Yuvak Mandal has begun to arrange games and recreation for them.

The only fly in the ointment of the Panchayat programme is the lack of maternity and child welfare services. Parbati, the leader of women, is highly critical of this. The Sarpanch is also unhappy about it. The midwife attached to the Block does visit the village. But that hardly solves the problem. Katli badly needs to get some women in the village trained as *dais* so that the immediate needs of expectant mothers can be met. But prejudice is still standing in the way. Many people in the village even now think the *dai's* job an unclean one.

The Panchayat is fighting against this mentality. Luckily it has some supporters among women. The Gram Kaki has already volunteered to be trained. Other women are also becoming interested. But they are still hesitant as they are not readily getting the support of their menfolk. If the Panchayat can enlist at least three such volunteers to start with, that is good enough. The Block doctor has assured the Panchayat that they will be trained in the village itself. They will also be supplied with free medical kits.

Even in the matter of family planning, the village has made some progress, at least psychologically, if nothing else. The villagers are now aware of what the problem really is—that an unlimited number of people depend on limited land. The Sarpanch talks of how the population of his village has doubled itself during his lifetime. The doctor attached to the Block Health Centre suggested that the Panchayat might discuss this problem in the Gaon Sabha meeting. But the villagers were too shy to do this publicly. So there had been informal talks in small groups. These were mostly organized by the Gram Sevikas and the Social Education Organizer allotted to the village. Most of the villagers understood the urgency of the problem. Yet nobody was prepared to discuss it freely and openly.

The family planning scheme is not only an economic proposition; it is also a problem of health. Women need

some rest in between deliveries. Because of their confinement, agricultural work also suffers to a great extent. More babies mean less food for the family if the family income fails to keep pace with the new additions.

No one had a clear idea about the steps to be taken in this respect. Fortunately the doctor, who often visits the village because of the co-operation of the villagers, promised to give all help to the villagers. He would not only discuss with them various birth control methods, but also supply medical accessories for this purpose. The functional committee of the Panchayat on women's welfare in co-operation with the Mahila Mandal is trying to create a mental climate in which such medical advice is likely to be accepted.

The child welfare programme is not too bad, though it can certainly be improved. A Balwadi has been set up in one of the spare rooms of the absentee landlord's house. There is a creche where mothers can leave their children when they go to work in the field. The children get free milk there. There is also a proposal to open a children's park. This was decided by the Panchayat last year, when Children's Day was observed throughout the country on the birthday of the Prime Minister. The only problem is finding a suitable piece of land. When the Zamindar could be persuaded to give a room, could he not be further persuaded to give the attached compound for the purpose? Well, the delegation referred to earlier has been asked to do the persuading.

A month ago a group of farmers from the adjoining district came to visit Katli which got a special prize for being the cleanest village in the State. They asked Anup Singh the secret of their Panchayat's success.

"Each of us works for the welfare of all, and all work for the welfare for each," Anup Singh said.

The Panchayat, with the support of the Gaon Sabha, has all along stood like a rock in spite of fissiparous tendencies in the village. Ultimately it could rise above caste prejudices and hereditary clan or group factions. Nor could

petty party politics halt the forward march. The villagers now realize that rural development affects everybody and can be done successfully only when all unite. It has given the Panchayat the strength it needs. In turn, the Panchayat is rendering rich service to the people.

Most of the people in the village have a specific duty. The Panchayat is the executive body. Each of its members is conscious of his rights as well as obligations. Various committees and functional sub-committees are appointed by the Panchayat to look after the special claims of youth, women and children. The members of these sub-committees make it a point to attend all the meetings and contribute their best through discussions. Once a decision is agreed upon, they try their utmost to implement it. And above all is the Gaon Sabha, the village Parliament of adults, who, by their presence, make the Sabha representative of all castes, creeds, or interests. They have elected the Panchayat. And they expect it to work for them. They have the right to call for any information. They can criticize any action of the Panchayat. But they also give them applause where it is due.

That, in short, is the secret of the success of the Katli Panchayat. The Panchayat, as a whole, is accepting more and more responsibilities and discharging them to the satisfaction not only of the villagers but also of the Panchayat Samiti, its higher body at the level of the Community Development Block. The Samiti guides and advises many of the Panchayat's activities. The Katli Panchayat is represented in the Samiti, like a hundred others, through the Sarpanch. The Samiti, in turn, is guided by the Zila Parishad, the highest of the three-tier elected body. The Panchayats, through the Samiti, are represented there as well.

Anup Singh, as the head of his village 'government' is, for the first time in his life, realizing his role in the development of his country. A school added to his village means an addition to the national plan for schools. An additional drinking water well in the village is part of the hundreds

of thousands of wells that the nation is aiming at. The eradication of malaria in his village is part of the national effort for the eradication of disease in the country.

Above all, he is helping in arousing the people from their age-old slumber. Intelligent and responsible villagers, through the training they are receiving at the Panchayat level, elect their representatives to States and to the Union Parliament. They elect their own candidates, as they do in the village, after considering all factors. This enlightened electorate will ultimately guide the activities of their representatives in nation building programmes.

"You are doing excellent work", said some visitors to the Sarpanch at the end of a short visit.

"It is the village people who deserve congratulations. They are discharging their responsibilities as responsible citizens of India," the Sarpanch said.

The tenth of October will come to the village of Katli again and again. At this rate, there will be more and more to be proud of with each passing year and ever greater cause for rejoicing.

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